DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 222 SO 029 046

AUTHOR	Zsohar, Elizabeth
TITLE	The World of Ancient Mexico. Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar Abroad 1997 (Mexico).
SPONS AGENCY	Center for International Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	40p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Awareness; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Global-Education; Instructional Materials; *Latin American History; Latin Americans; *Mexicans; Multicultural Education; Social Studies; World History
IDENTIFIERS	*Latin American Studies; *Mexico

ABSTRACT

This unit provides background information and activities about ancient Mexico including the Olmecs, the Mayans, the Toltecs, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, and the Aztecs. Brief readings are followed by activities that cover a wide range of subjects within each culture. Illustrations throughout the text highlight the topics. A 24-item bibliography concludes the unit. (EH)

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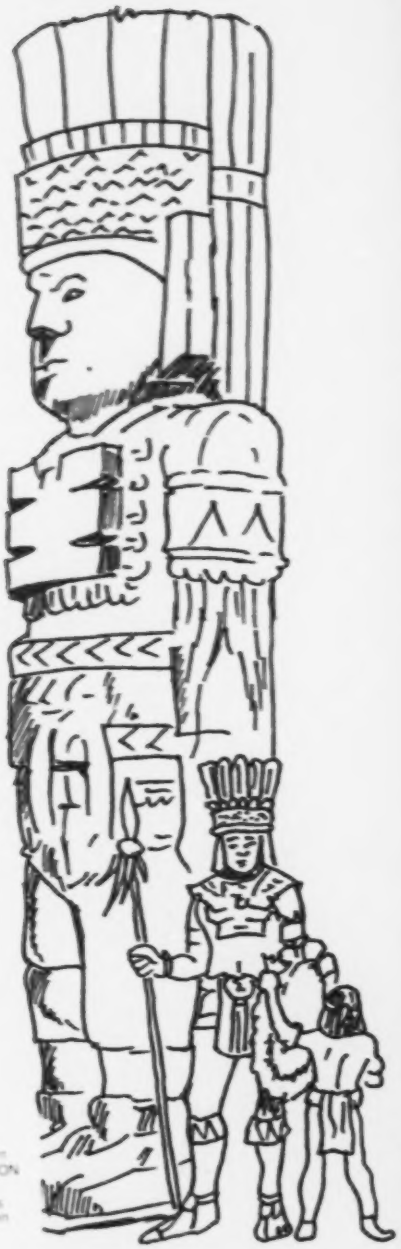
The World of Ancient Mexico



by

Elizabeth Zsohar

November, 1997

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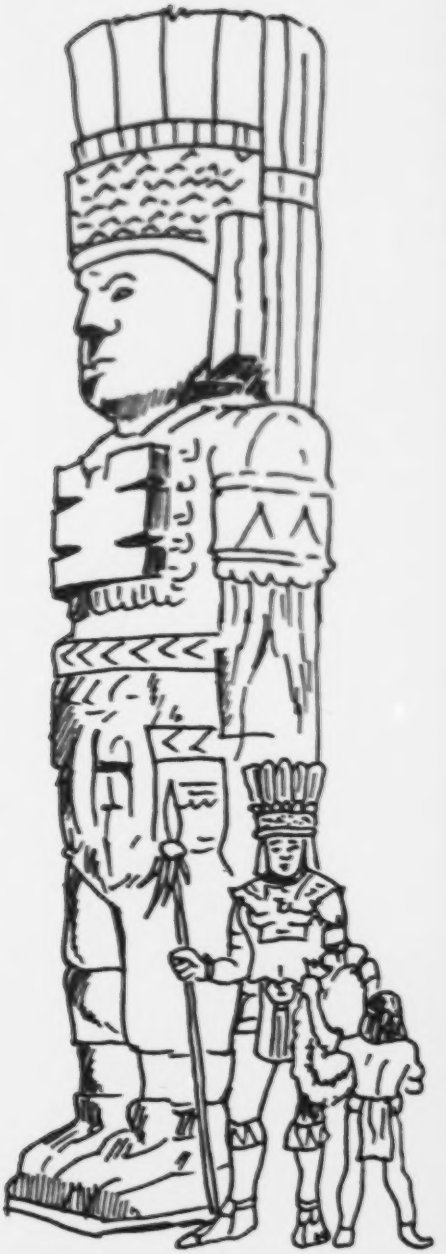
The World of Ancient Mexico



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Special thank to the Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar for Teachers Program for providing the opportunity to spend five weeks in Mexico during the summer of 1997. This program, a cooperative venture of the U.S. Department of Education and Comision Mexico-Estados Unidos para el Intercambio Educativo y Cultural, enabled our group of 16 educators from throughout the United States to interact with numerous academics, educators and experts in Mexico. Most of all it gave me a better appreciation and understanding of our neighbor to the south.

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ANCIENT TIMES

The first people who lived in what is now Mexico probably arrived as early as 20,000 B.C. They were Indians who migrated from the north. They arrived in the northern part of present day Mexico called Aridoamerica. It is situated between two large mountain ranges that separate the Sierra Madre. Aridoamerica was a region of little and irregular amounts of rain, with large plains and mountainous areas, almost desert like. The Indians were hunters who lived in small temporary communities. They followed the herds of buffalo, mammoths, mastodons, and other large animals that roamed the land. The people had a primitive culture and the greatest numbers of them lived by hunting and off the scarce fruits of the land. Some people practiced seasonal agriculture and in some places, as in Paquime in Chihuahua, prosperous zones were developed. They maintained commercial relations with the civilizations to the south in Mesoamerica.

The difficult life conditions made the inhabitants of Aridoamerica fierce and terrible warriors. Many used bows and arrows, far superior to the weapons used in Mesoamerica. The Aztecs called these people "chichimecas". The proud Aztecs had forgotten that they also has been "chichimecas."

The people who migrated to the south began to organize and build large religious and government centers around 1200 B.C. Ancient civilizations appeared and disappeared several times between approximately 1200 B.C. and A.D. 1521. Societies would rise to greatness, flourish, and then collapse, only to have others replace them.

Ruins of Paquime

TIME LINE OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS IN MEXICO

Make a time line to represent the ancient civilizations of Mexico. Mark each centimeter to represent 100 years (a century). Place the main civilizations in it proper time.

1200 - 600 BC
Olmec

150 BC - AD 750
Teotihuacan
'Place of the Gods'

900-1200
Toltec

200 - 1200
Maya

1200-1521
Mixtec

1350-1521
Aztec

♦ 1521
Conquest by Spanish

What else was happening in the world at the same time? Find out the time which goes with each of the following important events or people.

reign of Tutankhamun in Egypt
reign of Augustus in Rome
the Great Wall of China completed
Hawaii inhabited by Polynesians
first Buddhist temples built

Aristotle lives in Greece
Carthage wars with Rome
Erik the Red in Greenland
William the Conqueror
Exodus of Israelites from Egypt

THE OLMECS

"Only a century ago, the Olmecs were entirely unknown, yet today they are regarded as the creators of the first civilization of America."
Henri Stierlin
The World's Last Mysteries

The Olmec Indians of the southern Gulf Coast made the first great advance toward civilization in Mexico.They are often refered to as the mother of cultures of Mesoamerica. The Aztecs called the area Ohman "land of rubber". Thus the people were called Olmecs. The Olmecs found many uses of rubber they got from trees in the rain forest. They made a ball out of rubber and played a game in which two teams competed on a special court. The game is still played in Mexico.

The Olmecs were primarily agricultural people. They built no cities, except for religious purposes. Olmec farmers grew beans, squash, and maize maize, an early form of corn. Like agricultural societies, the Olmecs depended upon the seasonal flooding. They developed a calendar to keep up with the flood season. They also developed hieroglyphic writing to keep a record of events.

Olmec cities were centers of religion. In the middle of each were great stone temples. Looking out over the city were huge carved stone heads 8-12 feet high carved out of basalt. 16 of these huge heads have survived. Whether if rock, wood, clay, or jade, Olmec sculptures generally feature masklike faces, drooping mouths, flat noses and catlike eyes. Some mix features of human with those of a jaguar, an animal that appears to have played a part in the religion of the Olmecs and other civilizations to come.

Archaeologists have uncovered four important Olmec settlements. By about 1000 B.C. the town of La Venta had become the major center of Olmec culture. La Venta is located on a large island, surrounded by swamps and rivers, near the northern coast of what is now southern Mexico. Most of the Olmec were farmers and growing food to support La Venta. The leaders controlled most of the land that was used for farming. They also built stone monuments to remind the people of the authority of their leaders.

Artifacts and ruins in La Venta provide us with some hints about the religious beliefs of the Olmecs. Like the other people of Mesoamerica, the Olmecs were polytheistic. They believed in many gods to explain the forces of nature. Like following cultures, Olmecs built special temples and altars to make sacrifices to the gods.

Around 400 B.C. Olmec civilization was gradually beginning to disappear. Historians are not certain why the culture faded. Some think the system of agriculture began to break down from overuse of the land. La Venta and other settlements were abandoned. The Omecs' idea of kingship, their skill in astronomy and the symbols they used in their art became the traditional beliefs of most Mesoamerican civilizations. The Toltecs, Mayas, Aztecs, and others recalled the glory of the ancient Olmecs.

THE MAYA CIVILIZATION

As the Olmec Civilization declined, the Maya civilization arose along the coastal lowlands. The Maya people clearly benefited from the Olmec Culture. They built large pyramids and temples, worshiped a jaguar god, and adopted the Olmec Calendar. Between A.D. 250 - A.D. 900, the Maya built the richest civilization yet seen in the Americas.

Agriculture was the heart of the Maya economy. Maize, or corn, was the heart of Maya agriculture. Maize was first grown in Middle America in about 5000 B.C. The cob of this early maize was tiny, about the size of a shelled peanut. When it was heated, maize exploded like modern popcorn.

Over the years, Mesoamerica farmers improved their crops of maize. It was the most important part of the Maya diet. Yum Kax, the Maya god, became a significant part of the Maya religion. The Maya performed special ceremonies for the planting and harvesting of maize.

The Maya farmers also planted other crops, too, such as beans, squash, and peppers. They also grew cacao trees, which provided chocolate - the favorite drink of Maya rulers. Most Maya grew avocado and papaya near home. They hunted for animals such as deer. Farmers and hunters sold many of their crops and products in city marketplaces.

Maya Society

Maya society was divided into classes. At the top of society was the king. Below the king were the "great lords" whose power was passed down from father to son. They were political and religious leaders. The great lord appointed the town and village chiefs, probably choosing his younger brothers and cousins for the most important posts. Next came the lesser lords, who ruled the towns and villages. They commanded their own soldiers, presided over local council of nobles, and served as judges. They were in charge of seeing that the towns paid the tribute to the great lord or king.

Priests came from the noble class. The second sons of the lords often became priests, as did the sons of priests. The high priest advised the lords, performed ceremonies in temples, and wrote the sacred books. He also taught other priests how to keep the calendars, cure diseases, write their heiroglyphs, read the stars, and foretell the future.

Most Maya people were commoners. They worked in the cornfields, supporting themselves and their rulers and priests, and provided the labor to build the ceremonial centers. They also had to give tribute to their rulers, such as vegetables, fish, woven cloth, honey, jade beads, and shells.

Slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder. People became slaves by being taken prisoner in war, being born to slave, or being orphaned. Becoming a slave was also a punishment. If someone was caught stealing, he became a slave for life to the person he had stolen from.

Growing up, boys and girls lived very differently. When boys were in their teens, they moved out of their family home into large group homes. There they learned to play the ball game. Boys also learned to become soldiers. Girls stayed at home where they were strictly raised by their mother. They learned how to cook maize and other food and how to run a household.

ACTIVITIES

1. Compare the system of learning of the Maya with those of the ancient Greece.

2. Draw a step pyramid and illustrate the different levels of the Maya society.

Calendars

The Maya watched the skies and kept precise records of what they saw. They considered the planets and stars to be deities. They believed that by tracking the heavenly bodies, they would see patterns that would predict the future. The movement of the stars told the kings when to go to war, celebrate royal marriage, take the throne, and hold religious rituals. The Maya were so accurate in their observations that they could predict solar and lunar eclipse, as well as the cycles of Venus. Some Maya buildings appear to have been built to study the sky.

The Maya's extensive familiarity with the skies and their remarkably advanced mathematical knowledge enabled then to use an accurate calendar to regulate their activities and keep records. The Maya calendar, similar to that of other ancient Mesoamericans, was highly refined.

Three separate calendars were used for different purposes: the sacred round, a solar calendar, and the Long Count.

The sacred round was a year of 260 days, consisting of 20 day names and 13 numbers. Each day had a day name and a number, such as 1 Akbal, 2 Kan, and 3 Chiccan. This is similar to our calendar with 7 day names and 30 or 31 numbers. Each of the 260 days was associated with a deity who was believed to influence people born on that day. The sacred round was used to plan religious ceremonies.

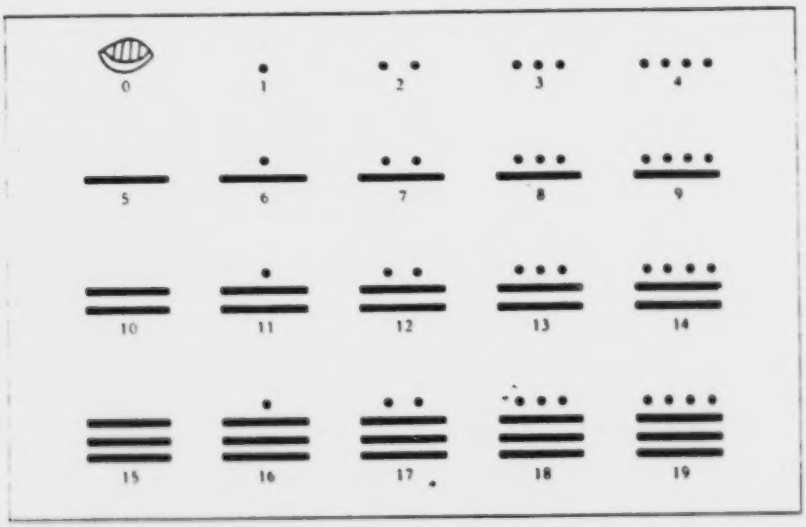
The solar calendar had 365 days divided into 18 months of 20 days each, with a short month of 5 days, which were considered unlucky days. Each day had two names: its sacred-round name and its name in the solar calendar. A particular day, such as 8 Ahau 12 Ceh, would occur only once in 52 years. The ending of a cycle and the beginning of a new one was celebrated as a major festival. Dates on monuments are always given according to both calendars.

The third Maya calendar is called the Long Count. This counted days from a fixed starting point - the day the Maya believed the universe began. The Maya counted thousands of years into the past from this date to show a king's connection with ancestors and gods, and thus his right to rule. They also counted ahead to the future.

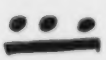
ACTIVITY:
Look up *calendar* in the encyclopedia. How does the Maya calandar compare with other calendars in history.

Maya Math

The Maya created a mathematical system that helped merchants keep track of goods and scribes keep track of history. This system used glyphs that the Maya developed to represent numbers. As brilliant mathematicians, the Maya operated a number system with only three symbols: a bar for five, a dot for one, and a shell for zero, a very advanced mathematical idea. Like the zero we use, it showed place, separating two numbers representing different powers of 20.



When the Maya wanted to write large numbers, they arranged these symbols in columns. The bottom number was tun (units), the next number was katun (number of 20's), the next was baktun (number of 400's). The numbers are read from top to bottom. 428 looked like this:



1 BAKTUN = 400
1 KATUN = 20
8 TUN = 8
Total = 428

The Maya wrote numbers using dots for 1, and bars for 5. The number of dots and bars and their arrangement designates a particular number. For example, in column A, multiply 400 by 4 (1600), multiply 20 by 8 (160), multiply 16 (3 bars and 1 dot) by 1 equals 16. Add 1600 + 116 + 16 = 1776.

In the following table fill in B - F with numbers. Write the Maya number on the table G - K.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
×3,200,000						•					
×160,000						═					
×8000					•	•					
×400	••••		•	••••	—	•					
×20	••• —	•• —	—	•••• ≡	•••• ≡	•					
×1	• ≡	•••	•• ≡	—	• ≡	••••					

A 1776

B _____

C _____

D _____

E _____

F _____

G 3

H 68

I 684

J 16,947

K 6,569,235

The Ball Game

One of the structures in every Maya city was the ball court. Here a fierce ball game, called *pokta-pok*, was played. Located near the king's palace, it ranged from the size of a volleyball court to a football field. The playing area, shaped like an I, was a narrow sloping walls with two end zones. The ball was made of solid rubber and was very heavy. It was larger than a basketball and probably bounced higher than any ball.

Players wore helmets and padding on their arms and legs, for the game was rough. They were not allowed to touch the five pound ball with their hands, only hips, thighs, shoulders, or upper arms. The two teams rushed up and down the court trying to get the ball through a stone hoop. If they succeeded, they won the game. Excited spectators filled the stands and gave gifts to the winning team.

This game was part of Maya religion. Those who lost were sometimes killed as a sacrifice to Maya gods. The Maya believed their gods would help if they sacrificed something as important as a human life.

When they played this game, Maya warriors and nobles were acting out a scene from Maya myth. By playing the game, Mayans identified themselves with the ancient heroes who won over evil. The ball was kept in constant motion in the air, just as the sun and moon move and turn in the sky.

IF YOU WERE AN ANCIENT MAYA

If you were born as an ancient Maya, your way of life would be different if you were a noble or a commoner, a boy or a girl. It also would vary depending on where and when you lived. With this chart you can trace the course your life might have taken if you were a commoner living in the Yucatán during Postclassic times (900–1500).

You were born in Yucatán. . . .

As a Boy . . .

You probably live in a simple house with stone walls and a thatched roof. Right outside is a small patio for a vegetable garden and fruit trees. You and your parents, young brothers, and sisters all sleep in one room. Until the age of three or four, your mother cares for you.

At age 4 or 5 a small white bead is fastened to your hair, which you wear until about age 13 as a sign of purity. Your father takes over your care and begins training you to be a man.

▼

At about age 13 you participate in a ceremony called the descent of the gods. After a formal ritual, a priest cuts the white bead from your hair as a sign that you can marry.

▼

As a teenager you live in a separate house with other unmarried young men. You paint yourself black, and work with your father in the cornfield.

▼

At about age 14 you marry a girl from the same village and social class as you. Your father chooses your wife with the help of a matchmaker, and your mother makes clothes for you and your bride.

▼

As a husband and father you spend most of your day working in the cornfields. After work you join your family and pray to the ancestors and gods. You wear your hair long and braided, wound around your head with a tail falling behind, and tattoo your hands, face, and body.

As a Girl . . .

At age 4 or 5 a string is tied around your waist with a red shell hanging from it, as a sign of purity. You wear this until about age 13.

▼

At about age 13 you participate in a ceremony called the descent of the gods. After a priest performs a ritual, your mother removes the red shell from the string around your waist as a sign that you can now marry.

▼

As a teenager you learn to cook tortillas, weave, and take care of the house. Your mother teaches you to be modest: Whenever you meet a man, you turn your back and step aside to let him pass.

▼

At about age 14 you marry the man your father has chosen with the help of a matchmaker. Your husband comes to live with you in your parents' house for about six or seven years, then you move to a new house near your in-laws' house.

▼

As a wife and mother you work at home, cooking, sewing, weaving, raising fowl, and going to market. Sometimes you work alongside your husband in the field. You wear your hair long and tattoo yourself from the waist up.

When you die, your body is wrapped in a shroud and your mouth is filled with ground corn and jade beads for you to use as money in the afterlife. You are buried under the floor of your house, and the house is then abandoned.

Maya Writing

One of the most significant achievements of the Maya was their creation of the first complete writing system in the Americas. In this complex system , the images, or glyphs, combine large elements that stand for the idea of a word with small elements that stand for the sounds of syllables and that indicate the grammar. Moreover, the glyphs changed in the course of time, and different forms of them were used for different purposes. Although the system is far from being totally deciphered, more inscriptions are being successfully read all the time. They show the Maya's great interest in royal and military affairs and the incorrectness that they were religious and calendrical. Glyphs occur on architecture, sculpture, and ceramics.

Stelae like this one found in Copan were carved to record important dates and events in Maya history. The Maya must have felt that stelae looked like trees, for they called them *te-tun*, or "tree stones". Maya stelae focus only on the lives of rulers. 13

A **stelae** is a carved or inscribed stone pillar used for commemorative purposes. Throughout history, stelae have been erected to make the sites of important events and the graves of important people. The Maya were no exception to this custom. They carved ornate stelae from huge pieces of limestone and obsidian, often covering the entire rock surface with intricate designs, glyphs, and pictures. They used stelae to record history and mark the passing of time.

ACTIVITY

1. Draw a stelae in the space to the right and decorate it to commemorate some important event in your life or the life of your family. Use pictures or designs.

2. Other ancient civilizations used stelae. Research to find out who did use them, what they looked like and why they were used.

3. The Indians of Northwest America made **totem poles**. Compare these with the Maya stelae. In what ways were they similar? different?

The *Popol Vuh*

Much of what we know about Maya beliefs come from the ***Popol Vuh***, a sacred book written in the 16th century by the Quiche Maya of Guatemala. Like a bible, the ***Popol Vuh*** contains stories that explain. The next story tells the Maya version of how the earth was created.

The Story of Creation

Before the world was created, there was just sky and sea. Then two gods began to talk. They were Gucumatz, the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, who lived in the water, and Heart of Sky, called Hurricane, who lived in the sky. The words they spoke formed the mountains and earth, trees and plants.

Then they made birds, jaguars, snakes, and all the other animals. The creators asked the animals to praise them, but the animals just squaked and howled. So the creators decided to create people who would worship them.

First they made a person of clay. The person talked, but its words made no sense. Its body was weak and it crumbled. So the gods destroyed the clay person and tried again.

This time they made people of wood. The wooden people looked, spoke and had children, but they were beings without smiles or tears. They lacked souls and understanding, and didn't respect the gods. So Gucumatz and Heart of Sky sent a great flood and destroyed the wooden people. As a reminder of this failed creation, some of the wooden people were allowed to survive - as monkeys.

There were still no people to worship the gods, so Gucumatz and Heart of Sky called on the fox, coyote, parrot, and crow to bring white and yellow corn from the mountains. The gods ground the kernels nine times and made the flesh of the first four men, using water to create human blood. These people of corn were very different from the wooden people - they were wise and understanding and knew how to properly worship the gods.

But Gucumatz and Heart of Sky were still not happy. They worried that the new people were too much like gods, since they could see everywhere and understand everything. So Gucumatz and Heart of Sky clouded the eyes of the men so that they would see only what was nearby. To make up for taking away their perfect vision and understanding, the gods gave the first men beautiful wives. These men and women were the parents of the Quiche Maya people.

ACTIVITY

1. In books read the story of creation of other cultures. Compare them with this story. How are they alike? How are they different?

2. Use your imagination and draw a picture to illustrate this story.

Why the Maya Civilization Collapsed

No one knows for sure why the Maya abandoned the huge city states that once formed the core of their world. Overpopulation, combined with not enough good farmland, may have led the Maya to leave lands that no longer provided enough for for their people. Some archaeologists have found evidence of a drought at about the time the lowland city-states were abandoned.

Or perhaps war was the cause. Before the mid-eighth century, battles were limited to seizing power and taking captives for sacrifice. After that, warfare became more general, leading to widespread destruction of lives and property. Rivalries among competing city-states may have erupted into civil war.

In earlier times, however, the Maya had also left their cities and moved to new areas. Perhaps they were simply repeating the pattern.

We may never know the real reason, or reasons, for the collapse. But that doesn't stop people from trying to figure it out. Archaeologists dig for clues, epigraphers translate glyphs, and others, too, study the Maya and come up with their own ideas - all trying to solve the mystery.

The Maya city-states may have "collapsed", but the Maya people did not disappear. They moved north to the Yucatan Peninsula, where their civilization flourished until the arrival of the Spaniards in 1521.

THE TOLTECS

Over the years wandering tribes of hunters who worshipped serpents and jaguars settled in the central valley of Mesoamerica. They grew cotton, corn, beans and peppers. They were weavers, carpenters, potters and stonecarvers. They became know as the Toltecs, or "those who are civilized." They became master builders and developed a city called Teotihuacan, a holy city where they would worship the sun, the moon, serpents and jaguars and a trade center of two hundred thousand people.

Towering over Teotihuacan were the mighty Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. From the heights of the Pyramid of the Sun, priests saw the sun rise and the sun set every day. They believed that this was the daily birth, death, and rebirth of the sun god, ruler of the sky. Between the two huge pyramids was the Avenue of the Dead. At the southern end of the avenue was a small platform on which sat the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the "feathered serpent," god of learning. The Toltec believed Quatzalcoatl had brought them civilization, had taught them how to grow food, weave, carve, cut stone, and build a city. They feared that if they did not use the knowledge Quatzalcoatl had given them, the great god would return to his kingdom in the east.

Toltec priests carefully measured the travels of the sun and the moon across the sky. They created two calendars. One was a 365 day calendar that kept track of the farming seasons. The other, a 260 day calendar kept track of religious ceremonies. After 52 years, the cycle would begin again.

Ordinary Toltecs were forbidden to live near the pyramids and temples. Only priests, nobles and the slaves of both could remain in the city. Everyone else lived in special districts or in other Toltec towns - Tula, Toluca, or Cholula. Between 700 and 750, famine, disease, revolts, and attacks from uncivilized tribes put an end to the sacred city of Teotihuacan. Those who survived, fled. According to legend, Quatzalcoatl returned to the east as he had threatened.

Around A.D. 1000, rivalry among segments of the society and hostile action by Chichimecs, the Toltecs abandoned Tula migrated south. They developed the city of Chichen Itza on the Yucatan peninsula. But they never regained the power they once possessed.

ZAPOTECS AND MIXTEC

Like the Maya, the Zapotecs created an outstanding culture of their own and still have direct descendants today in their original area. Their center was Monte Alban, situated on the hilly terrain near the modern city of Oaxaca about 500 B.C. Their civilization declined after the fall of Teotihucan, but they were not completely conquered. Later they established a ceremonial center at Mitla. Aside from their excellent architecture, the ancient Zapotecs were known for their ceramic urns with elaborate mythological figures.

The Mixtecs gradually took over the Zapotec realm and were also not fully conquered by the Aztecs. Women played a greater role in government and war among the Mixtecs than any other ancient group. Influenced by the Toltecs, the Mixtecs became artists and craftsmen highly valued in the entire Mesoamerican world, producing fine pottery and carving in fine stone, bone and coral. They were especially prominent in metalwork, and are considered to have produced the finest turquoise mosaics and gold jewelry of any ancient Mexicans. The Mixtecs also were creative in their painted codices. Eight of these Mixtec historical books have survived, which made it possible for historians to trace events as far back as 800 B. C.

AZTECS

The Aztecs built the last and greatest Indian empire. As the Toltec empire fell apart, another group of people who called themselves *Mexica,* came into the Valley of Mexico from the northwest searching for a place to settle. According to legend, Huitzilopochtli, their main god and god of the sun, told them they would find their new homes and farmlands on a lake in a valley. There, perched on a cactus, an eagle would fight a serpent. They saw this sight on a island in Lake Texcoco, and here where they settle and built a city named *Tenochtitlan,* which means "place of the prickly pear cactus."

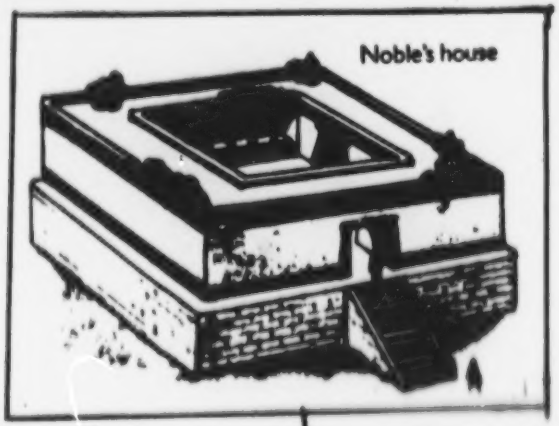
At first Tenochtitlan was no more than a collection of reed huts surrounding a temple. Although their land was poor, the Aztecs soon developed an agriculture system. They began to eke out an existence by fishing for food, hunting for waterfowl in the marshes and doing trade with neighboring tribes. They carved canals through the marshlands. In the lake, they piled up the lake's soil to make smaller islands. Most of these islands were about the size of a football field. These islands were called *chinampas.* Chinampas were held in place by wooden stakes and the roots of willow trees. Some chinampas actually floated. Broad causeways connected parts of the city.

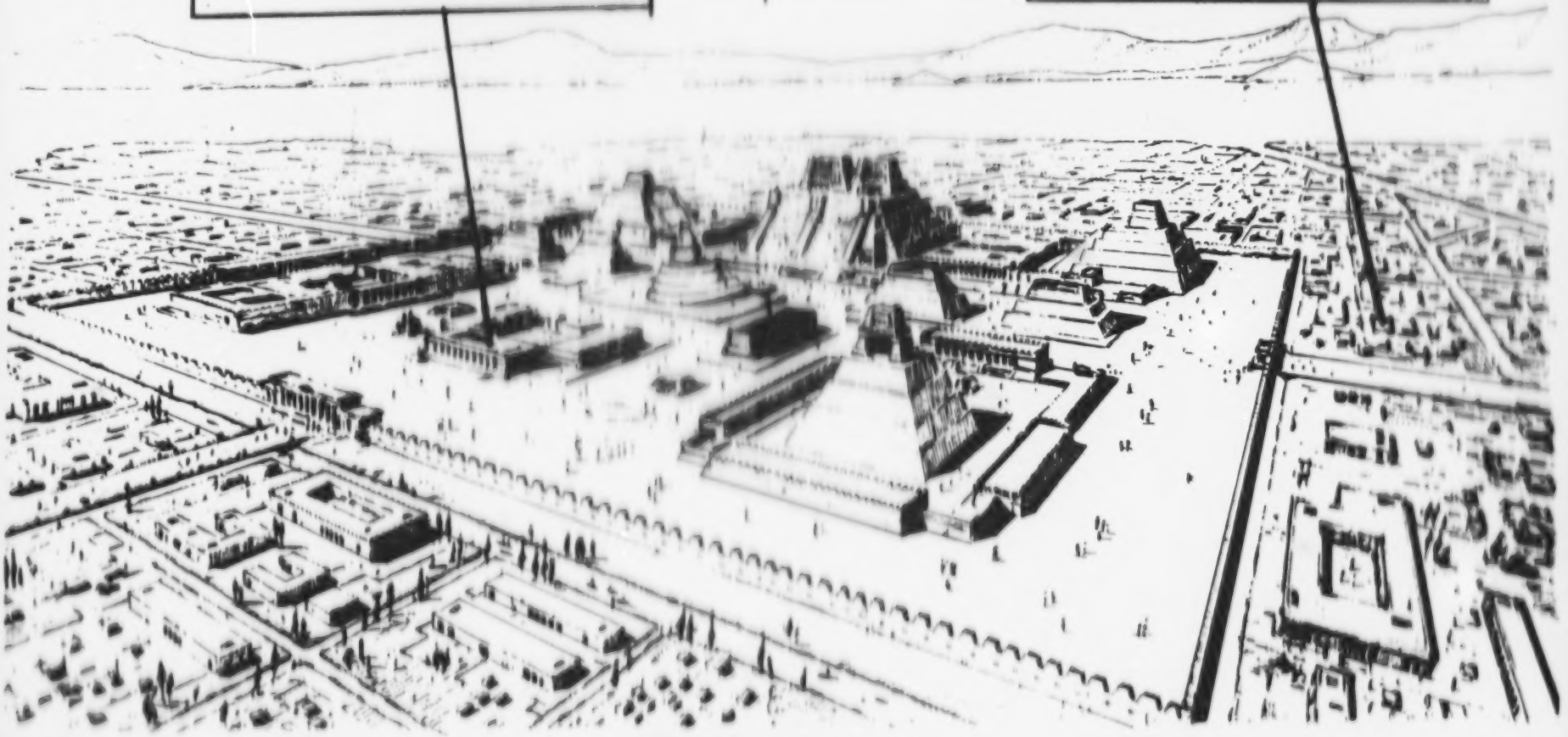
In the heart of the city was a walled area with great temples. Next to this was the enormous royal palace, two stories high. The ruler and his household used the upper level, and government officials used the lower level. The area inside the palace also housed a jail, a court, countinghouses, workshops, and storehouses.

Close to the palace and temples was a huge market. This sold not only food, but also pottery, precious stones, cloths, fuel, tools, and animal skins.

There were strict rules about buildings. Only nobles were allowed to build their large stone, brick, or plastered houses near the palace. Ordinary families lived in one room red and mud houses, where their relatives lived.

The whole city was built in a grid pattern, separated by a network of canals. People mainly traveled about in flat-bottomed wooden canoes. Three wide causeways stretched in different directions from the temple area to the mainland. Gaps in the causeways, spanned by bridges, allowed the canoes through. If enemies threatened, the bridges could be removed.





Tenochtitlan

The sign that led the Aztecs to settle in Tenochtitlan, "place of the prickly pear cactus", was an eagle perched on a cactus fighting a serpent. This has become the emblem of Mexico. This symbole appears on Mexico's flag and also on their money, the peso.

THE AZTEC WAY OF LIFE

The Aztec society was divided into distinct social classes, with a major division existing between landowners (noblemen, warriors, and merchants), and the landless (artisans, other commoners, serfs and slaves). Noblemen owned large estates, some private and some connected to the office they held. They served as judges, administrators, rulers of subject cities, ambassadors and tribute collectors. Their position was gained by achievement and merit, especially heroes of war. Noblemen could dress extravagantly, could marry more than one wife and had schools of their own.

Merchants were prestige group just below the nobility, but could not flaunt their wealth. They had close business ties with the craftsmen whom they supplies with imported materials. Long distance merchants went off on high risk, high profit trading expeditions that might last over a year.

Warriors were a very important people in the Aztec life. The empire had been won in battle and was maintained by military vigilance. Success in battle, especially the taking of prisoners, was essential for social advancement. When actual warfare hit a slack season, the Aztecs would fight a tournament with certain neighbors to keep up their skills and to obtain prisoners for sacrifice. There were only a few professional soldiers, since all men were trained for service as part of their schooling. Weapons included the sword-club edged with blades of obsidian, thrusting spears, slings, and javelins. Troops usually wore body armor of quilted cotton, but the special group of jaguar knights and eagle knights wore special uniforms. Tribute was the chief goal of conquest and the persons and property of the enemy were kept as intact as possible. The destruction of the enemy's chief temple, whose god had opposed the Aztec gods, was a sufficient token of victory.

Women made cloth at home from cotton, plant fibers, or rabbit hair. The yarn was spun by hand, with the lower end of the spindle either passing through a clay disc or resting in a ceramic holder. Girls were taught to spin at a very early age. Dyes for the yarn came from a variety of plant and animal substances. The woman to the right is weaving on a simple backstrap loom. After weaving, cloth might be additionally embroidered or ornamented with feathers. The rush mats on the floor are still typical of Mexican rural interiors.

Then, as today, the staff of life of the Mexican home was the tortilla. In the home, the hearth rested on stones which supported a circular stone griddle. The maize was ground on a concave stone with the aid of a stone roller. The tortillas were formed by patting and clapping with the hands. Besides maize and other vegetables, game, and fish were important foodstuff. Turkey stew was a favorite dish on special occasions, and dogs were also raised for food.

CLOTHES

The style, color, and material of the Aztecs' clothes showed their exact place in society. Each class and occupation had their own garments and emblems. There were strict rules about what people could wear. If people disobeyed these rules, they were killed.

Men wore a simple loincloth and a cloak made from a square of material, knotted on the right shoulder. The cloak of a peasant was not allowed to reach lower than the knee.

Women wore ankle-length skirts and sleeveless tunics.

AZTEC RELIGION

The Aztec gods were all-powerful. They sent the rain, caused the sun to rise, and brought droughts, floods, illness and death. They watched every activity in every hour of the day and night, so there was nothing a man could do in work, plau, war or daily like that the gods did not know about. From birth until death, they controlled his life.

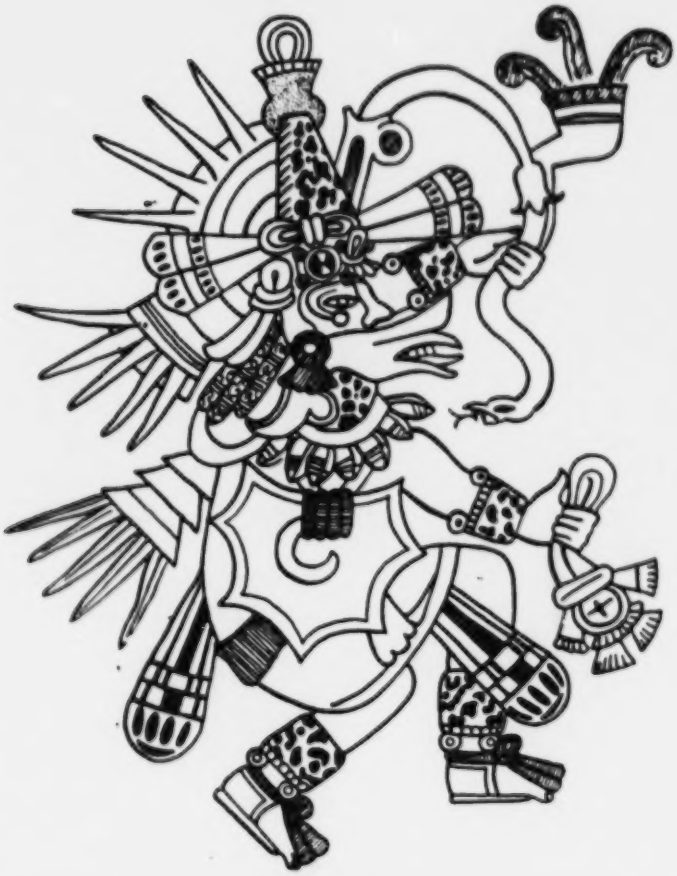
The most powerful gods were Huitzilopochtli, God of War and the Sun, and his only rival in greatness, Tlaloc, the Rain God. Huitzilopochtli had to be kept strong to enable the sun to rise every day and, to give them strength, man had to offer his most precious, life itself, the blood from his own heart.

Therefore, in every month, sacrifices were made when priests stretched captives across a stone block, plunged a knife into their breasts and tore out the still beating hearts. Thousands of victims were sacrificed every year and the Aztec' principal reason for waging continuous war was to obtain an endless supply of prisoners who were sacrificed to their gods.

Huitzilopochtli, God of War and the Sun

Tlaloc, God of Rain

But there were many other gods, including those of earlier peoples and of the conquered tribes. No god could be ignored. Another god was Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, whose coming was dreaded, because he would claim the kingdom which had once belonged to the Toltecs.



Quatzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god, to the Toltecs and Aztecs, took many different forms. According to legend, Quatzalcoatl, who was said to have light-colored skin and a beard, would return one day to his kingdom.

AZTEC WRITING - CODICES

Archeologists have found out a great deal about the Aztecs from studying painted books, called codices. Mayans also wrote codices. Codices consisted of a single sheet of paper, made by beating the bark of wild fig trees, or of animal parchment. Sometimes, images were painted on flat sheets which could be rolled. Images were also painted on long strips which were then folded like a screen, and often enclosed between two thin wooden boards.

The Aztecs wrote in pictures. Pictures of animals, plants, weapons, or jewels often stood for exactly what they were. But some pictures had a symbolic meaning.

Some codices were very practical. They were records of court proceedings, important historical events and customs, laws, or land boundaries. Some were religious. They showed the Aztec calendar and the songs and dances for different feast days.

There were rules for drawing people. The proportions were not natural. The head and the feet were usually shown from the side, while the body was shown from the front.

When the Aztecs conquered a town, they demanded all kinds of goods, called tribute, from the inhabitants. A fixed amount of tribute was sometimes due every 80 days, or sometimes once a year. The list for each town was recorded in a codex. Each town had its own picture symbol, made by combining several pictures.

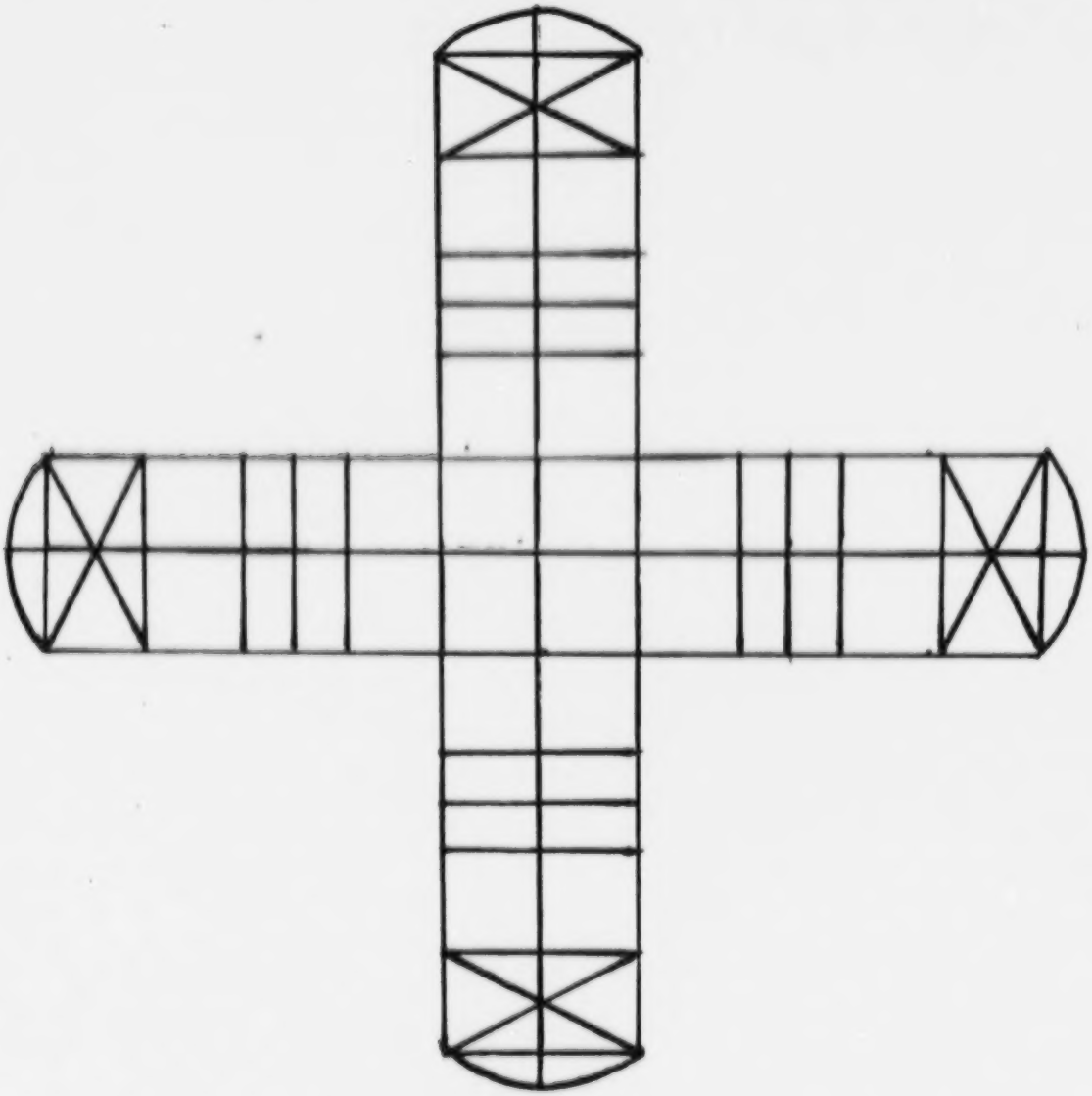
ACTIVITY

Write a story in pictures and present it as a codex. You may write about your life, or some event in your life.

THE AZTEC CALENDAR

The Aztec calendar stone representing the surface of the sun was used in ceremonies honoring the sun god Tonatiuh. His face is in the center of the stone. The tongue sticking out is believed to represent his thirst for blood. Many archaeologists believe that Aztec priests placed the hearts of human sacrifices here. Other carvings are religious symbols and symbols for the days of the month.

PATOLLI



A popular board game was patolli. The exact rules are not known, but what is known is that players raced their markers around a course painted on a mat. Beans painted with dots were used as dice.

ACTIVITY

Invent your own version of patolli. You could draw the board on paper. Use stones as markers and six dried broad beans, each marked with a dot on one side, for dice. Four people can play. Each person starts and finishes at their "home." Decide on rules for when one player lands on another, and what number you need to throw to start and to finish.

GROWTH AND DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE

By the early 1400's, Tenochtitlan had become a powerful city and the Aztecs became a powerful empire. They had created an alliance with two other city-states, but the Aztecs were overpowering and created a vast empire under Montezuma I. His successors expanded the empire until the empire extended to the east and the south. Hundreds of conquered towns paid heavy taxes in goods to the empire.

Aztec rulers, who had to belong to the royal line, were elected by a small group of top religious and military leaders. The leaders had supreme authority in warfare and foreign affairs, while a "prime minister" looked after domestic matters. The emperor, whose native title meant "great orator", was treated like a god on earth. His life was one of luxury, although subject to unending ritual. Several of the earlier Aztec rulers were military geniuses and forceful empire builders, but Montezuma II, who reigned from 1502 until his death in 1520, was a quiet man of a scholarly cast of mind.

In 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortes, landed on the east coast of Mexico and marched inland. His group were joined by many Indians who had been conquered by the Aztec and resented the heavy taxes. Reports of the invading army were carried to Montezuma. The tales of Spanish guns and horses - which the Indians had never seen before- and of soldiers in armor made Montezuma fear the return of the god Quatzalcoatl, which legends had foretold would return from the east. Cortes entered Tenochtitlan and made Montezuma a prisoner.

By 1521, the Spaniards had conquered the Aztec empire. The Spaniards considered it their duty to Christianity to wipe out the temples and all other trace of the Aztec religion. They destroyed Tenochtitlan and built Mexico City on the ruins. Recent years, archaeologists have excavated many of the sites in Mexico City and have restored other Aztec and other early cultures sites.

Thousands of people in Mexico today have Aztec ancestors, and many of them speak a modern form of Nahuatl. Many Mexican place names, including **Mexico,** itself come from Nahuatl. Some of our English come from Nahuatl, as well, such as *avocado, chocolate, tomato*. Well known Mexican painters, such as Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco, have used Aztec themes in their work. Foods of Aztec origin, including chili, chocolate, tortilla, and tacos, have become popular in many countries.

John Green, *Life in Ancient Mexico Coloring Book*

WORD SEARCH

Use the clues to complete the puzzle. The word in the outlined box is the name of the scientific study of culture of past human life and activities.

1. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

2. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

3. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

4. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

5. ____ ____ ____ ____

6. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

7. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

8. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

9. ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

10. ____ ____ ____ ____

11. ____ ____ ____ ____

1. System for recording of years, months, days
2. Juice of tropical tree used to make balls by Olmecs, Maya, and Aztecs
3. The last main ancient civilization in Mexico
4. Capital of the Aztec empire
5. Important civilization living in the Yucatan
6. Name for the area of modern Mexico during ancient times
7. The mother of Mexican civilizations
8. "Feathered Serpent" god
9. Board game played by the Aztecs
10. yellowish metal used by Mixtec and Aztec artists
11. 260 and 365 days in ancient Mexico

ACTIVITY

Use the encyclopedia to learn more about archaeology. Write a report on what archaeologists study and how they gather information.

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VIDEO

Coleccion Ciudades del Mexico Antiguo. **MEXICO.**